

*Father's Day
Stay Focused!*

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Key Text: Hebrews 12:1-3

I. Introduction – Coming Home to Jesus!

It's hard to believe we have arrived at our final Sunday together as we gather for worship on Father's Day. When I look back and think of the ground we have covered it has been a truly amazing journey of faith, hope, perseverance, change, great joys, deep heartaches, and of love.

We have been part of and witnessed many people come to faith in Jesus Christ or to be restored. I read about a lady in our Upper Room devotional guide who said "she had finally come back to the Lord". We are reminded that our labor in working for God's Kingdom is never in vain. The lady who had been part of a Bible study had wandered from God and the church, but by God's grace she found her way "home" and was now being used by God to host a Bible study in her home made up of women from various cultural backgrounds. We have witnessed many come back to Jesus and share testimonies of God's grace working in their lives.

II. Things to Celebrate

There have been many baptisms, many youth confirmed into the faith and the life of the church, wonderful Starting Point sessions, Wednesday evening suppers and studies, so many missional opportunities to be part of, and as Lee Anne said last week, the list could go on and on as to all the ways you have testified to God's love as we've journeyed together through the valleys and on the mountain tops of life.

And I do want to add, after the previous two weeks' discussion of technical fouls in the church league basketball, I did nothing to deserve my technical, either!! It's just that I couldn't let Lee Anne walk that lonely path by herself. All I said to our player was to foul the other player to get them to the free throw line, so we could maybe get the ball back. That was a time I should have just kept my mouth shut! That's not always so easy! Oh, the lessons we learn.

III. Being Sent

The Long Farewell! That's the title of this 3-week sermon series that Pastor Lauren came up with in my office as we were processing this transition in our lives

and the life of the church. It was meant to be funny, and it is. It is also true as four months into the transition just seems so long, yet so necessary to do this transition well. Good byes are hard to do. It's been a time to reflect and celebrate, but also a time of grief and loss for all the ways our hearts and ministry have been so intricately woven together. Going to see many of our members in the nursing home or homebound is a little bit gut wrenching. We just pray God keeps us all in the palm of His hand as we all now journey into a new season of life and ministry, you with Pastor John and Karen who are very capable, and us with Aldersgate UMC. And, yes, we feel a bit like Abraham and Sarah being called from our familiar home being sent to a new place, a new people, a new adventure.

IV. The Kingdom of God is Like a Mustard Seed

A few things which I think are important for us to think about begins with this Let us remember what we are all involved in, where ever we are, is the growing and building up of God's Kingdom. This is not our own. We do what we do for God's glory. The Kingdom of God is like the smallest of mustard seeds that starts tiny, then grows so large that the birds come to make nests in its branches. (Matthew 13:31-32). We've watched baby birds and their parents at the parsonage this spring. Just remember as God takes care of the birds, God takes care of you, too.

Jesus tells this parable to help us realize for both your own spiritual life and the life of the church—small beginnings have big endings. Everything in life tends to start small and then it grows. It takes time. The challenge is not to grow impatient and frustrated. How many times have I heard Jordan tell me when I get up to bat to be patient and yet I swing at the 1st pitch? Anxious to put a ball in play. And yet, if I take a pitch do you know what I tend to do on the next one? I focus more. I then choose a better pitch and tend to make better contact—not always, but more often than not.

We do not like things that move slow. It's less exciting. We want to get straight to being the plant instead of the seed that's becoming a plant. We prefer product to potential. Let's remember all substantial change is slow change. That is an advantage of a longer appointment in the Methodist Church.

Zechariah 4:10 says "Who dares despise the day of small beginnings, since the 7 eyes of the Lord ranging throughout the earth will rejoice to see the work start".

And, yes, we have done a lot of good work for the Lord together here at CUMC. Remember to celebrate—we should celebrate but our work for God is never done. So, in this time of transition ask yourself, “What small start can you and God make right now?” When Lee Anne asks us to close our eyes and say a little prayer last week I had many things run through my mind, one which was “God, help me let go so you can help me move forward.”

Abraham and Sarah gave up a lot and had no idea how things would turn out as they stepped out and trusted God to journey east, but God had a plan and we know God has a plan for us and for CUMC as well.

V. Honi and the Carob Tree

Prayer has always been at the heart of ministry for me. I’ve loved our Prayer Conferences and special times and evenings of prayer. Mark Batterson, who wrote the book Circle Maker uses a phrase, that goes like this: Dream Big, Pray Hard, and I’ll add Trust God!

Mark tells the story of a Jewish rabbi named Honi who draws a circle and says he will pray and stay in that circle until God brings rain to a parched land. Honi was a miracle maker.

There’s actually another story about Honi that ties into where we find ourselves today. Honi, as wise as he was, sometimes saw something that puzzled him. He would ask questions to unravel the mystery.

One day, Honi was walking along the road and saw a man planting a carob tree. Honi asked the man, “How long will it take for the tree to bear fruit?”

The man replied, “70 years.”

Honi then asked, “And do you think you’ll live another 70 years and eat the fruit on that tree?”

The man answered, “Perhaps not. However, when I was born into this world, I found many carob trees planted by my father and grandfather. Just as they planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren, so they will be able to eat the fruit of these trees.”

Friends, fathers, mothers—how important is it to take care of the world, to take care of the church for the next generation! It’s part of us building and working for the Kingdom of God.

Alister Biggs has said “The Kingdom of God happens quietly, but it happens inevitably... Don’t underestimate God’s power.”

VI. Staying Focused on Jesus!

Part of a running theme of this sermon series has been staying focused. A key scripture for Culpeper UMC from early on in our time together is today’s lesson which has been used the last 2 weeks as well. Our vision statement is to “Focus on Jesus and to Make Him Known”. We selected this vision along about 2005-2006. Knowing we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses—those who have journeyed on before us and left their faith legacy which we enjoy today. We, too, have to now throw off whatever it is that hinders us from living into God’s plan—our fears, our frets, our anxieties, our pasts... We have to move beyond the sins that so easily entangle us and trip us up and cause division between us, God, our family and friends. And we are called to run the race with perseverance which God has marked out for us. And the only way we achieve this and reach the finish line well is by keeping our eyes focused on, fixed on, and set on Jesus. Why? Because it is so easy to get distracted. What tends to distract you from following Jesus and running your race of faith well? What causes you to grow weary and lose heart? What causes you to get side tracked?

We found on our hike on the Sierra Trail that for the most part the path was very clear. There were a few times, especially in the wooded and sandy areas, where we were not sure which way to go. I realized I could just keep plodding along and maybe it would be in the right direction. Remember, as Lee Anne said, in the wilderness there was no one else around. I chose to slow the pace, pay attention, and to say at one point, “I’m not sure we are on the right trail.” So we paused, talked about it and one time, walked back 50 to 60 yards to get back on the correct trail. It would be so easy to get lost and wind up somewhere we did not want to be. Isn’t that true for life?

VII. Keep Being Imitators of Christ

In fixing our eyes on Jesus I am also reminded that Paul talks about us being “imitators of Christ”. In Ephesians 5:1-2 Paul says, “Be imitators of God , as dearly beloved children, live a life of love, just as Jesus loved us and gave Himself up for us.” I Peter 2:21 expresses it like this, “For you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might walk in His steps.”

Over the last number of years, I have truly benefitted from making the effort to take better care of myself. We call it self-care and I thought years ago “that sounds selfish”. It’s because as you care for yourself in healthy ways you can better care for others. A wholistic approach to self-care is best. Paul talked about staying fit spiritually and we also have to stay fit physically, mentally, and relationally. If all ties together and if we can do this by fixing our eyes on Jesus whom we are to imitate, all the better.

A couple of months ago I was in a class at Gold’s Gym with one of our members who is an instructor. It just so happens we’ve baptized all 4 children and I’ll never forget in one class she announced she was expecting again and that her pastor was in the class so it was a good day to share that.

At any rate, April Henderson is such a good leader/instructor in that class. What makes her a good instructor? She is patient, she is encouraging. She explains things very clearly that even an old guy like me can get it. It’s just something she does which makes it easier to follow along, to do the exercises, stretching and strength conditioning which helps you improve your fitness and to get the most out of the exercising and to the class. The calmness and care in her voice gives you some confidence when you are not exactly sure what you are doing, and even if she does it so well and you don’t, at least you know you are headed in the right direction. She makes it easy to follow and if you do your best to imitate her (I’m not sure I’m that close), you’ll get better at it. And over time, I think I have.

How well are you imitating Jesus? How well are we following in Jesus’ footsteps? I hope better today than 15, 10, 5, or even 1 year ago. It’s a process, friends, but if we stay focused on Jesus whatever we do, wherever we go, with whomever we encounter, our witness will be more loving, gracious and impactful.

People want to follow April because they know their lives can be better and improved.

Even more so, we want to follow Jess because Jesus offers us the best way to live life.

VIII. Trust in the Slow Work of God

Just know change and transition don’t happen quickly and, like a butterfly coming out of the cocoon, it takes a little time before it can fly, we all have that in

between time which leads to new days and new beginnings. We enter into a season where Patient Trust can serve us well.

Pierre Telhard de Chardin, a French philosopher and Jesuit priest, is attributed with writing about Patient Trust that goes like this:

“Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability—and that it may take a very long time.

Only God can say what this new spirit gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing that God’s hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

And friends, there is still this deep sense that even though God is not finished with any of us yet, that we can all be confident of this, “That God who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ.” (Phil 1:6)

Thank you so much for allowing me to be your pastor for 15 years. Your love, your patience, your forgiveness, your support, us serving side by side. May our work together be seed to help share the love and grace and salvation of Jesus Christ to all who are present today and for all who will come after us.

Thank you, Culpeper UMC family and may God bless you always in all ways!

IX. Closing Prayer

Let us Pray:

God, our words cannot express our love and appreciation we have for You in how You joined us together 15 years ago and how we now part ways. Yet knowing because of You, God, we’ll always be connected to each other. For the joys, for the sorrows and for all the in between we give you thanks. Help us, Lord,

to always keep our eyes fixed on Jesus so even in the days where we struggle, or stumble, or misstep that we can always find our way home.

In Jesus' Name,

Amen.

DO IT ANYWAY

People are unreasonable, illogical & self-centered.

--Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

--Do good anyway.

If you are successful you will win false friends and true enemies.

--Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

--Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.

--Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds.

--Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

--Fight for some underdog anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

--Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you help them.

--Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you've got and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

--Give the world the best you've got anyway.